Religion, Gender, and Representation in American Politics

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ABSTRACT Several recent analyses have examined the effects of religious beliefs, belonging, and behaviors on the representation of women in American politics. Taken collectively, these studies present an interesting puzzle. Specifically, they demonstrate that religious adherents express attitudes that are less supportive of women in positions of political leadership and that at every stage of the process, from primary candidacy to general-election victory, women are less likely to run and win in districts with greater numbers of religious adherents. However, this does not appear to be the result of even the most devout voters' unwillingness to support women candidates in general elections. This body of work, therefore, suggests that the effect of religion on the representation of women manifests at earlier stages of the process, including individual vote choice in primary elections, party and elite recruitment, and potential candidates' strategic entry decisions.

For much of the subfield's history, American politics researchers did little to account for religious variables. Explanations for this exclusion vary; Wald and Wilcox (2006, 523) suggested that among them are "the intellectual origins of the discipline, the social background of practitioners, the complexity of religious measurements, and the event-driven agenda of political science." Even as religious groups began to play greater roles in electoral politics, growth in the subfield was slow (Wald and Wilcox 2006; but see Layman 2001; Leege and Kellstedt 1993). However, particularly in recent years, the explanatory power of religious variables has become increasingly evident. Moreover, the inclusion of religious indicators—ideally measuring respondents' belonging (e.g., denominational affiliation), beliefs (e.g., in a God or gods), and behaviors (e.g., frequency of church attendance) (Green 2010; Leege and Kellstedt 1993; Lewis and De Bernardo 2010; Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2018)—has become increasingly mainstream in behavioral research. The importance of religion also has been acknowledged—especially qualitatively—in intersectional studies of race, ethnicity, and gender in politics (Brown 2014; Harris 1999; Sriram 2016).

Many of the most-cited studies of women running for and winning elected office in the United States, however, still fail to account for respondents' religious beliefs, behavior, and—especially—belonging. Early considerations of voters' support for women candidates included only measures of behavior, such as church attendance or frequency of prayer (Dolan 1998; 2014; Lawless 2004). More recent analyses of individuals' political identities and attitudes (Cassese and Holman 2017) account for these factors, as well as divinely sanctioned beliefs about gender roles (e.g., belief in a masculine God and preferences for traditional gender roles). However, the majority of studies continue to omit indicators of belonging. This is particularly striking given the use and significance of measures of belonging, beliefs, and behaviors in gender and politics studies conducted outside of the United States (Benstead, Jamal, and Lust 2015; Inglehart and Norris 2003; Murray 2016; Norris and Inglehart 2012; Tripp 2019) and in sociology (Kenworthy and Malami 1999; Paxton 1997; Paxton and Kunovich 2003).

Analyses of gender and representation in the United States that do include measures of belonging reach paradoxical conclusions. Specifically, attitudinal research demonstrates that many religious adherents, particularly evangelical Protestants, express beliefs hostile to women in positions of political leadership (Bartkowski and Hempel 2009; Setzler and Yanus 2017). Moreover, aggregate-level analyses demonstrate that women are less likely to run and win in legislative districts with high percentages of religious adherents (Pyeatt and Yanus 2020; Setzler 2016; Vandenbosch 1996). However, behavioral research reveals that these representation gaps are not the result of voters relying on gender biases to cast ballots in general elections (Setzler and Yanus 2017; 2019). In light of this seeming contradiction, this article reviews and considers future research on the question of how religion and gender affect the representation of women in American politics.

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RELIGION AND GENDER ROLE, TRAIT, AND ISSUE STEREOTYPES

There are substantial theoretical reasons to believe that religious adherents, especially those belonging to denominations espousing

In US House of Representatives elections, for example, Setzler (2016) found that women are 25% less likely to run in primary elections in districts with greater total percentages of religious adherents.[1] In general elections, districts with higher percentages

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traditional gender roles, may be more likely to hold biases against women political leaders. In particular, white evangelical Protestant denominations—whose members comprise at least 20% of the American public (Burge 2019)—urge adherents to maintain a "divinely sanctioned gender order" with "two central components: patriarchal authority and a division of family labor based on the separate spheres ideology under which wives remain at home and tend to the private affairs of the family, while husbands provide leadership in the family and public affairs" (Wilcox 2004, 57). Although many evangelicals do not model these beliefs in their home (Wilcox 2004), they are prevalent within white evangelical churches: nearly all positions of public leadership are restricted to men.

Attitudinal research supports the link between individuals' belonging and behaviors and their beliefs about women political leaders (Bartkowski and Hempel 2009). In one study using Pew Research Center data, Setzler and Yanus (2017) found that approximately 25% of evangelicals stated that men better protect their interests; only 17% of nonevangelicals espoused this view. Moreover, evangelicals were nearly twice as likely as nonevangelicals to believe that men made better political leaders than women (Setzler and Yanus 2017). The frequency of these beliefs was even more common among individuals who not only belonged to the denomination but also attended church—and thus were exposed to strict interpretations of scripture—more frequently.

The resultant effect of these views on partisan politics is powerful. Cassese and Holman (2017) argued that the belief in traditional gender roles correlates with political conservatism. Thus, attitudes toward gender roles may explain why many religiously devout white Americans identify with the Republican Party. In addition, these beliefs may explain gender gaps in American party identification and political representation.

of religiously affiliated residents are half as likely to elect a woman as other districts. The effect of religion is similar in state legislative contests (Merolla, Schroedel, and Holman 2007; Pyeatt and Yanus 2020; Vandenbosch 1996). Women are 8 percentage points more likely to run and 6 percentage points more likely to win in less religious districts; these differences are more significant for districts with high percentages of evangelical Protestants (Pyeatt and Yanus 2020).

RELIGION AND GENDERED REPRESENTATION: A MICRO-EXAMINATION

The research discussed to this point seems to suggest that gender gaps in the representation of American women may result from religious voters discriminating against women candidates on Election Day. However, analyses of individual vote choice in both congressional and gubernatorial contests do not support this proposition. In general elections, even the most religious voters are willing to support a woman candidate—particularly a Republican woman candidate—as long as that woman shares their partisanship.

Specifically, in congressional races, Setzler and Yanus (2017) found modest effects for religious variables among all candidates. When examining only Republican candidates, however, the authors found that respondents belonging to evangelical Protestant and Catholic churches were actually 5% to 7% *more* likely to vote for Republican women than Republican men.[2] They posited that this may be because Republican women more effectively use "God talk"— for example, referencing the parable of the lost sheep by referring to a "stray lamb"—than Republican men (Calfano and Djupe 2011), thereby enabling them to build support among religious identifiers.

Despite theoretical reasons to expect that gender biases may play an even greater role in explaining vote choice in executive contests—because these positions more clearly place a woman in a position of public authority—studies of gubernatorial contests

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RELIGION AND GENDERED REPRESENTATION: A MACRO-EXAMINATION

Delving more deeply into questions of representation, scholars have conducted aggregate analyses of patterns in American women's candidacies. The results are consistent with attitudinal analyses. Women are less likely to be nominated, run, and win in areas with higher percentages of religious adherents, particularly evangelical Protestants.

yield similar results. Even individuals whose belonging and behaviors make them most likely to hold biases against women political leaders rely largely on their partisanship when casting a ballot in gubernatorial general elections (Setzler and Yanus 2019).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This article reviews existing scholarship on how religion and gender affect the representation of women in American politics.

Extant literature reveals clear gaps in where women candidates run and win; these gaps are consistent with the population distribution of religious identifiers most likely to hold biases against women political leaders. However, paradoxically, at least in general elections in which partisan cues are present, these beliefs do not appear to affect individual vote choice.

With this in mind, I consider future directions for research on gender, religion, and representation in American politics. Many publicly available datasets can be used to facilitate such analyses. In the aggregate, data on religious behaviors and organizations, as well as other contextual variables, are available from the US Census Bureau. Furthermore, the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (ASARB) provides decennial measures of belonging.[3] At the individual level, most public

research suggests that—as in general elections—women are less likely to run in both parties' state legislative primaries in highly religious areas. However, the role of gender in winning primary elections is unclear (Pyeatt and Yanus 2018).

Primary elections also offer an opportunity to consider—absent the potent predictive power of partisanship (Dolan 2014)—whether individual voters' choices are filtering women candidates out of the candidate pool. Thomsen (2015), for example, suggested that primary voters view Republican women as more moderate, making it more difficult for women to earn a place on the general-election ballot. However, individual-level studies of the role of religion at this stage in the process have not been conducted, perhaps because reliable data on individual vote choice in primary elections can be difficult to acquire.

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opinion surveys conducted by political scientists (e.g., the Cooperative Congressional Election Study) and public research organizations (e.g., the Pew Research Center and the Public Religion Research Institute) include questions addressing belonging, behaviors, and/or beliefs. These include denominational affiliation, whether individuals consider themselves to be born again, and frequency of church attendance and prayer. Some of these studies ask additional questions relevant to religion, gender, and representation, including validated vote choice, attitudes toward women as leaders, and views on social and political issues. Researchers who select samples and design question sets for these studies, however, should be encouraged to be conscious of intersectional racial, ethnic, religious, and gendered identities. The Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey (CMPS) may be instructive in this regard (Barreto et al. 2017).

There are countless possibilities for how researchers might use these data; this discussion considers a few. First, using CMPS and other datasets sensitive to intersectional concerns, scholars should conduct quantitative analyses (in addition to continuing to collect qualitative accounts) to consider more fully how intersectional identities affect political candidacies and representation (Simien 2007). For example, analyses of American politics reveal that black Protestants often behave differently than their white counterparts. As Dowe (2016, 57) noted, "[r]eligion is often referenced as a distinctive trait of African American and Southern culture...the role of religion and Biblical literalism is...significant in the Black community and is grounded in the social conservatism of the group." Similar forces also may affect Hispanic and non-Hispanic Catholics. Furthermore, religious adherents in the North and the South, the East and the West, and urban and suburban areas also may differ in their beliefs toward gender roles and propensity to support women candidates.

Second, researchers should consider primary elections at both the aggregate and individual levels to better understand whether there is a front-end selection mechanism. Preliminary aggregate

Third, the discipline would benefit from further research on the role of religion in candidate recruitment. Scholars have demonstrated the powerful roles that parties and other groups can play in identifying potential candidates (Crowder-Meyer 2013; Sanbonmatsu 2002). However, if party elites hold traditional beliefs about gender roles—particularly if those views are grounded in religious doctrine—then gatekeepers may limit women's access to the ballot. Studies of the Utah Republican Party, however, suggest that these effects can be mitigated by prompting party elites to consider nominating women (Karpowitz, Monson, and Preece 2017). These effects are particularly noteworthy because Republican Party leaders traditionally place less priority on diversity in leadership than their Democratic counterparts. In fact, their reputation as a "good ol' boys" network has led many conservative women to form their own political organizations (Deckman 2016).

Fourth, scholars must consider the underlying reasons why fewer women run and win in more-religious areas. It may be that many risk-averse women candidates (Kanthak and Woon 2015) see highly religious areas as inhospitable, and they select out of candidate pools. Because fewer women have run and won in these areas in the past, women candidates in more-religious states, districts, and localities also may lack role models and mentors—an important influence on women's entry decisions (Ladam, Harden, and Windett 2018).

Alternately, or perhaps in addition, it may be that women—particularly devout white women—in these constituencies hold religiously grounded gender biases. As a result, these women may regard participation in public affairs as inconsistent with their doctrinal views of the role of women (Cassese and Holman 2016). They may choose instead to take positions of leadership closer to the private sphere, perhaps taking an active role in a Parent Teacher Association or in organizing church events and mission work. Qualitative and quantitative research on women's attitudes toward leadership, community engagement, and self-perceptions of their own civic skills (Djupe and Gilbert 2006) could shed greater light on this decision calculus. ■

NOTES

1. The density of religious adherents is calculated using data from the ASARB decennial census on religious congregations and membership. Specifically, these studies measure religious adherents as the percentage of "members, their children, and the estimated number of other participants who are not considered members" of any denominational group (Grammich et al. 2012).

2. The authors also controlled for behavior, specifically church attendance. However, this has no substantively significant effect when measures of belonging are introduced.

3. Although these data are reported at the county level, they can be manipulated to other units of analysis using the techniques described in Adler (2002).

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